

Committee on Resources, Full Committee

- - Rep. James V. Hansen, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6201 - - (202) 225-2761

Witness Statement

**STATEMENT OF
WALTER "BUD" P. PIDGEON, JR.
PRESIDENT,
THE WILDLIFE LEGISLATIVE FUND OF AMERICA (WLFA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MAY 23, 2001**

Mr. Chairman:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America (WLFA) regarding the importance of recreational access to public lands. WLFA was organized in 1977 to protect the American heritage to hunt, fish, and trap and support scientific wildlife management. We pursue these objectives at the federal, state, and local level on behalf of over 1.5 million members and affiliates.

America's public lands provide critically important fishing and hunting opportunities to hunters and anglers across the nation. The latest National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation indicates that over 4 million Americans hunted on our public lands. Over half of these citizens hunt exclusively on public lands. Limitations on hunting access to public lands would have catastrophic effects on this large segment of the sporting community.

Hunting and fishing are important recreational activities occurring on public lands and access to those lands is crucial to maintaining hunting opportunities for millions of Americans. Four major public lands systems provide hunting (and fishing) opportunities: National Forests (192 million acres), Bureau of Land Management (264 million acres), National Wildlife Refuges (92 million acres) and Preserves within the National Park System (20 million acres).

Each of these systems individually provide access for hundreds of thousands of hunters and anglers. BLM estimates over half a million hunted on lands under its management. Forest Service numbers are comparable, but barely tell the whole story. Try to imagine elk hunting without access to Forest lands in the west. Trying to imagine the pursuit of wild turkeys in the Appalachians without access to the Forests of Virginia and West Virginia.

And even unites of the National Park System - the Preserves - provide critical access for hunters. For example, in South Florida's Big Cypress Preserve (established as the first Preserve in 1974) there are nearly 20,000 man-days of hunting effort each year. In urban South Florida, our hunting tradition would be eliminated without Big Cypress.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a special case where many of its over 500 units were acquired with hunters' dollars. Monies raised annually for over 60 years from the sale of Duck Stamps. Now over half of the units are open to hunting providing an array of opportunities from duck hunting in Atlantic salt marshes to brown bear hunting on Alaska's Kodiak Island.

Access to public lands for an array of recreational activities is critical to assuring public health, maintaining public support for land conservation and management, and providing a stable economic base for many rural communities. Unfortunately, many recreational users -- including hunters and anglers -- felt less than welcome on their lands in recent years. The hanging out of a "not welcome" sign on our public lands was clearly contrary to our laws and Congressional intent. And it cut off much of the citizen support for conservation of the important habitats and resources on these lands.

Hunters in particular have constantly battled for access to public lands and have needed Congress to assure that traditional access. The 1997 enactment of National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act is a case in point. Facing threats to hunting, fishing and other forms of wildlife recreation from a disinterested Administration and hostile animal rights radicals, the sporting community asked Congress for help. It responded by legislatively designating wildlife dependent recreation including hunting and fishing as priority public uses of refuges. Congress expressly recognized the legitimacy of these traditional activities on refuge lands and further provided that if found to be compatible, these uses are to be "facilitated" on refuges.

The 1997 Act may provide a model for recognizing and securing public access for hunting (and other recreation) on public lands. Express legislative recognition of these activities and a direction to facilitate such uses have assured hunting use of refuge units. The agency has responded to Congressional direction. Threats of lawsuits to close Refuges to hunting from animal rights extremists have been extinguished by the law. Passage of similar legislation for other public lands systems should be strongly considered. WLFA would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to fashion an appropriate legislative measure.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today. WLFA appreciates the Committee's consideration of the importance of recreation on the public lands and looks forward to working with the Committee to further ensure continued access to recreational opportunities.

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